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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000534

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: THE FOUNDATIONS OF OBASANJO'S FANTASIES

Ref: (A) Harare 422
- (B) Abuja 343

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (U) Although not a formal member of the Front Line States, Nigeria was in the vanguard of those fighting for the liberation of southern Africa. The current Chief of Staff of the Air Force has told us stories of the role he played in ferreting weapons to ZANU to shore up ZANU's fight against the Rhodesians.

2. (C) Nigeria's support for Mugabe today is rooted in the era of liberation. Nigerians generally, not just Obasanjo, are loathe to "abandon" someone they see as both prot ?and ally, the more so when there is a widespread perception that "the West" (especially the UK) is carrying water for white farmers whose forebears expropriated land belonging to the rightful black owners. In other words, the Nigerians believe that land issues are at the root of the political crisis in Zimbabwe, and they deeply resent pressure from the UK, feeling HMG did not do nearly enough to realize a fair and equitable redistribution of land in years past. They also ignore the overwhelming evidence that the GOZ is redistributing land not to right historical wrongs but to provide favors to supporters while punishing opponents. For them, this redistribution is "justice". The lack of reference to historical antecedents and established principles of land redistribution in Africa does not invalidate the "principle," in their minds.

3. (C) Obasanjo also believes he owes a debt to Mugabe, a friend for more than 25 years with whom he has a deep personal bond. Obasanjo was Head of State during the Lancaster House negotiations and has repeatedly stated that he pressured Mugabe to accept a constitution that would hold land reform in abeyance even though Mugabe wanted to forge ahead immediately on the issue. In the late eighties and early nineties, Obasanjo also counseled Mugabe to bridle his drive for land reform so events in Zimbabwe would not scare apartheid supporters and thus throttle reform in South Africa. After having twice asked Mugabe to cool his heels, Obasanjo feels obliged to support Mugabe on land reform now, the flaws that riddle its implementation notwithstanding. Obasanjo adheres firmly to an erroneous belief that Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis today is unrelated to the chaos arising from political events that have taken place over the past year.

4. (C) The Nigerians, again not just Obasanjo, find it just excruciatingly difficult to criticize Mugabe when they see him in conflict with his old adversaries (white Zimbabweans); this makes them want to see inequalities in land distribution as root rather than secondary causes of political and economic crisis. Zimbabweans and Nigerian diplomats in Zimbabwe see an autocratic and increasingly brutal old man who refuses to cede power gracefully. Nigerians in Nigeria, including Obasanjo himself, still see the Mugabe they supported in the 70s. These factors, together with the points made in para four, may underlie Obasanjo's willingness to believe GOZ assertions despite all evidence to the contrary. Of course, we cannot confirm that Nigerian diplomats in Harare report faithfully to Abuja the views they hold forth to U.S. diplomats. Ambassador Olufemi George, the MFA Under Secretary for Africa, professes a firm belief that land is the fundamental cause of Zimbabwe's instability. Other key advisors, including Foreign Minister Sule Lamido and International Affairs Advisor Ad'Obe Obe, take equally hard lines. The position that Obasanjo takes on the Zimbabwe question is fed and reinforced by these hardliners.

5. (C) Obasanjo was clearly annoyed with Australia for having implemented sanctions that went beyond those imposed by the Commonwealth. He made that clear in his letter to Howard, and it was one of the first points he raised in a meeting (ref B) with Ambassador Jeter and AF DAS Bridgewater. His personal

distaste for Howard magnified Obasanjo's outrage at Howard's unilateral action. Animus toward Howard is pervasive within the GON.

16. (C) Obasanjo has also been unhappy with MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, whom he views as unreasonable and inflexible. The

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fact that Tsvangirai went to the media with details about an earlier meeting with Obasanjo reportedly annoyed the Nigerian President. Moreover, Obasanjo tends to regard the views of those shorter in the tooth than he (whether in chronological years or in years of experience as a national leader) as less worthy of serious consideration than those of contemporaries. This tendency has at times heightened domestic tensions, and it may be a factor in his dealings, respectively, with Mugabe and Tsvangirai.

17. (C) That said, the British High Commissioner here believes that there is flexibility in Nigeria's position. Obasanjo desperately wants to hold the next Commonwealth Summit in Abuja and will not jeopardize that opportunity even for Mugabe. The HC told Ambassador Jeter that if a recommendation for Mugabe's continued suspension comes from the Commonwealth Secretary General and Secretariat Obasanjo will not oppose it and will go forward with the Commonwealth Summit even if Mugabe is excluded. However, if the recommendation comes from Howard, it will be much harder for Obasanjo to swallow.

JETER